SHAPING THE `AT-RISK' YOUTH

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The category of the `at-risk' youth currently underpins a good deal of youth policy. Primarily, it centres around a range of programs associated with the need for state intervention. The `at-risk' youth tenuously appears at the intersection of a variety of knowledges/problematisations, such as vocational guidance, youth welfare, family management, and so on. Whilst it is argued that in some ways, the `at-risk' youth simply replaces older characterisations used in the policing of the young, it will also be argued that the preventative policies associated with `risk' are constituted in terms of factors rather than individuals, that prevention is no longer primarily based upon personal expertise, but rather upon the gathering and collation of statistical knowledge which identifies `risks' within given populations, and that `risk' legitimates unlimited governmental intervention. Importantly, the category of the `at-risk' youth underpins crucial sections of policy documents such as the Finn Report (into credentialling/education and vocational competency). In this case, youth is deemed to be `at-risk' of not making the transition to adulthood successfully. It will be argued that not only is the Finn Report significant in the administrative and cultural shaping of the category of `youth', but also by employing the notion of `risk', the Report puts in place yet another element of an effective network of governmental intelligibility covering the young. Finally, it will be argued that young women, as a specific an example of a `risk' group (*vis-a-vis* obtaining certain types of employment), require particular forms of intervention, primarily through changing the vocational aspirations of their parents.

In a paper prepared for the Finn Report (1991), entitled *Dislocated Transitions: access and participation for disadvantaged young people*, Freeland (1991:177-179) asserts that:

> As is to be expected not all teenagers experience the same probability of being at risk in the transition to adulthood. Those most likely to be at risk tend to be members of households and groups experiencing socio-economic and cultural discrimination and disadvantage ... In addition, it should be remembered that young women are relatively more disadvantaged than are young men, a reality which mirrors gender based inequality and discrimination throughout society ...

Putting aside the matter of gender differences for the moment, two interrelated features of this statement are of interest here. The first is the focus on the transition from being a teenager, to being an adult. The second is the notion of being `at-risk' - in this case, of not making that transition successfully. As Sobski (1992) rightly observes in *Pathways to Finn*, these are familiar themes within youth policy.

In *An At-Risk Assessment*, Nardini and Antes (1991:56) state that, `By 1987, the buzzword *at-risk* was a commonplace adjective used by the academic community'. Certainly, the evidence would suggest that the notion of `risk' is now an integral feature of the `youth' research landscape. The `at-risk' youth appear at the intersection of a variety of knowledges/problematisations, such as within education, the labour market, youth welfare, health, family management and law enforcement, and so on. Generally speaking, it can be argued that:

1)`risks' are unevenly distributed and result in some individuals being more `at-risk' than others. That is, although some risks are evenly distributed, many others cluster in ways peculiar to themselves (Beck, 1992).

2)`risk' has become an important component of a grid of governmental intelligibility, through which individuals are differentiated as members of classes of person. For example, the notion of `risk' has become interwoven into the fabric of the disciplinary school, such that young people can now be measured against a graded, cumulative, and importantly, calculable set of `normal' risks - both by their age category, and by the severity of the risk involved (Ogden and Germinario, 1988; Ewald, 1991).

3) Not only does `risk' constitute a new and effective element of government, which in turn permits the construction of any amount of new `at-risk positions', but also `risk' currently appears to be one of the principal methods for articulating and legitimating the need for intervention of any kind.

4)The governmental scope of `risk' is not confined to the construction of specific characterisations, such as Finn's `the youth at-risk of not making a successful transition to adulthood'. It can be employed to deal with any number of actions or behaviours which are deemed to warrant intervention - quite independently of the fact that these behaviours may then be directly linked to certain groups (Bartos, 1992).

5)the `at-risk' youth is almost exclusively explained in terms of its family - itself also defined in terms of `risk'. For example, Palmo and Palmo (1989:45) argue that: `The at-risk youth is a representative of the family and symbolizes the severity of

the difficulties within the family unit. The greater the difficulties demonstrated by the youth, the larger the number of issues that need attention within the family ...'

6)the `at-risk' youth has largely replaced other ways of categorising `problem' youth'. Whereas the `delinquent' was once the focus of moral concern, then the `socially disadvantaged', now it is those deemed to be those `at-risk'. In all likelihood, both the individuals concerned and the mechanisms of appropriate intervention have changed very little in the intervening period (Bessant, 1993).

However, in spite of the claim that, in some ways, the social effects of being categorised as an `at-risk' youth differ little from being categorised as, for example, a `delinquent', it will be argued in this paper that several significant differences do exist. That is, the implications of governing through `risk' are far more extensive than simply the six points raised above.

An article by Robert Castel (1991), `From Dangerousness to Risk', makes precisely this point. Whilst he would agree that the `dangerous' youth has now been re-categorised as the `at-risk' youth, he suggests that what appears to be small, semantic change actually signals an important shift/expansion in the possibilities of government. Castel begins his argument with what he sees as a vital strategic shift within mental medicine - although he later extends the scope of these changes to all the social work and care professions. He suggests that the original justification for intervention was always around the notion of `dangerousness' - detecting, diagnosing and treating/confining dangerous individuals. `Dangerousness' was thus seen as a quality inherent to a given individual who was deemed capable of dangerous actions. Importantly, `dangerousness' has also been a capacity repeatedly divined within the young (Magarey, 1978:11).

However, an approach founded upon inherent dangerousness had two central problems associated with it: firstly, it limited any possibility of establishing and maintaining an effective policy of prevention. After all, `one could only hope to prevent violent acts committed by those whom one had already diagnosed as dangerous' (Castel, 1991:283). The second problem with this approach was that the credibility of psychiatry depended upon factors largely beyond its own control. That is, any system based upon the inherency of `danger' would always leave the profession vulnerable to criticisms over a lack of predictive consistency. Psychiatrists could not possibly hope to accurately diagnose and effectively neutralise `dangerousness' in every single case - short of

confining massive numbers of people on the smallest suspicion of `danger'. Furthermore, `Harmless today, they may be dangerous tomorrow' (Doctors Constant, Lunier and Dumesnil, 1874:67; cited in Castel, 1991:283).

Castel notes that, even in the mid-nineteenth century, psychiatrists such as Morel were well aware of the problems associated with treating `dangerousness' as a quality internal to any given individual. Morel suggested instead that the focus should fall upon an analysis of the statistical frequency of mental illnesses within specific strata of society. These could then be correlated to particular social circumstances, such as diet, housing, family circumstances, sexual promiscuity, and so on:

> In doing this, Morel was already arguing in terms of *objective* risks: that is to say, statistical correlations between series of phenomena. At the level of practices, he also suggests that the public authorities undertake a special surveillance of those population groups which might by this stage already have been termed `populations at risk' (Castel, 1991:284).

This new approach to social problems, as signalled by the shift from `dangerousness' to `risk', has three important implications for the government of populations. Furthermore, all are pertinent to the construction of the `at-risk' youth.

Firstly, the preventative policies associated with `risk' are constituted in terms of factors rather than individuals. Future dangers are now to be found, not hiding within the subject themselves, but within recognisable constellations of relevant `risk' factors. A youth no longer possesses a seed of delinquency, visible to the competent expert, rather delinquency lies within any number of statistically validated `risk' factors.

The second implication is that prevention is no longer primarily based upon personal expertise, but rather upon the implementation of a network of governmental intelligibility organised around the notion of `risk'. Whereas `risk' brought with it the benefits of both limiting the culpability of the specialist and of augmenting the possibilities of prevention, it also had the effect of actually subordinating that specialist to the administrator. Since `danger' was no longer believed to reside in any given individual, the face-to-face relationship of the helper and the helped became very much secondary to the much broader governmental establishment of `flows of populations based on the collation of abstract factors deemed liable to produce risk in general' (Castel, 1991:281).

The final implication of the general shift away from `dangerousness' is that the employment of `risk' has multiplied the possibilities of government. Indeed, Castel (1991:288) argues that:

> `Prevention' in effect promotes suspicion to the dignified scientific rank of a calculus of probability. To be suspected, it is no longer necessary to manifest symptoms of dangerousness or abnormality, it is enough to display whatever characteristics the specialists responsible for the definition of preventative policy have constituted as risk factors.

After all, as Ewald (1991:199) points out: `anything *can* be a risk; it all depends upon how one analyses the danger, considers the event.' This is especially evident in the field of `youth'. The first sentence in Ogden and Germinario's (1988) book, *The At-Risk Student*, begins: `All children are at times students-at-risk ...'. `Youth' itself has become an `at-risk' category. To be young is to be `at-risk', and to be `at-risk' is to be subject to governmental intervention.

Now back to the Finn Report. The general point that can be made here is that almost all of the characteristics of `risk', as outlined so far, are present within the Finn report. That is, the `youth at-risk of not making the transition to adulthood successfully', is both shaped, and operates governmentally, in some fairly familiar ways:

Firstly, and crucial to its aforementioned role in establishing an effective network of government, the Finn Report identifies a number of graded `risk' positions. Whilst according to the Students at Risk Program (1989) - which largely underpins the section of the Finn Report dealing with the `at-risk'- *all* students can be `at-risk' of underachievement and eventual unemployment, certain groups are more vulnerable to this outcome - these are the archetypal `at-risk' youths.

Secondly, within the Finn report, `risk' is completely and minutely calculable. Freeland (1991:178) outlines a number of different ways of reliably calculating the `at-risk' population, each purporting to arrive at a figure with an accuracy of 0.1%. In 1990, the statistics suggested that 15.6% of Australian 15-19 year olds were `at-risk'. By 1991, this had increased to 18.3%. This exhaustive and meticulous accumulation of data is the very mechanism by which knowledge is acquired concerning the social body, ie. it actually permits the construction of such characters as the `at-risk' youth. Also, it not only provides the very data by which `risk' is constructed, it uncovers fluctuations within the `risk' population, trends which have vital implications for future policy.

Thirdly, within the Finn Report, the notion of the `at-risk' youth has largely superseded the preceding notion of the `disadvantaged' youth, although in some parts the two notions are used almost interchangeably. However, `disadvantage' only seems to be used in the most general of contexts. It lacks the specificity of a `risk' analysis, either in terms of accurate statistical evaluation, or the flexibility and rigour concomitant with the possibility of `layering' one set of `risks' on top of another. Whenever a high degree of theoretical precision is required, it is `risk' rather than `disadvantage' which is employed.

A fourth familiar element is that `risk factors' are used rather than any totalised notion of the concrete individual. To quote Freeland:

> a focus on `disadvantaged' and, by implication, `advantaged' groups tends to direct their search for solutions towards the groups themselves - to individuals. A focus on inter-related factors contributing to inequalities in the patterns of participation and outcomes directs the search for solutions towards the contributory factors, not the people (Freeland, 1991:4).

A fifth point concerning `risk' and the Finn report also centres around the production and utilisation of `risk factors', in that the plethora of factors which constitute the `at-risk' youth are arrived at, not through first-hand observation followed by insightful extrapolation, but instead by the accumulation, collation and correlation of diverse statistical data. The conclusions of this research are then given to `the operatives on the ground' second-hand, who are trained to recognise the relevant factors and to act appropriately.

At this stage, it is important to mention that the role of expertise is not being underestimated here. When arguing that the role of the professional has changed as a result of new statistical and administrative techniques of knowledge acquisition and dissemination, this is not to suggest that professional expertise is now less important. Quite the reverse. It is precisely the plausibility and credibility of professional expertise which permits this kind of government to operate effectively, including that employing `risk'. The vital difference is that the expertise being referred to here works at a distance, rather than simply in the relationship between specialist and client. In the case of `risk', expertise largely operates by transforming the professional responsibilities and capacities of teachers, and also by re-shaping the practices and the aspirations of the pedagogic family.

Finally, it is this assertion regarding the aspirations of parents which constitutes that last noteworthy element of the nexus between `risk' and the Finn Report. That is, it has been argued that some young women are placed in an `at-risk' situation because of the vocational aspirations of their parents. For the purposes of this paper, this is the most important issue, since it concerns youth and the government of sex.

Whilst Freeland's (1991:178) `at-risk' statistics of 15.6 % in 1990, 18.3% in 1991 do reveal an upward trend in `youth at-risk', what they do not reveal is the discrepancy between the sexes. These figures actually breaks down into 12.6% males - 18.8% females for 1990, and 16.3% males - 20.3% females for 1991. This is a marked difference. Freeland argues that there are two central causes for this discrepancy. Firstly, young females are more vulnerable to sexual abuse within the family. This has been well documented (Girls at Risk, 1986).

This second difference is due to `the more rapid demise of female teenage full-time employment' (Freeland, 1991:179). Although in the last twenty five years the number of young males employed full time has dropped from 59% to 33%, the number of young females employed full-time has dropped from 58% to 23% - a far greater decrease (Freeland, 1991:167). The most evident reason for this sex-based discrepancy has been the survival of the apprenticeship system. Whilst many of the other areas of traditional youth employment no longer exist, the apprenticeship system has all but survived intact throughout the recession years. Furthermore, it is a system which is almost exclusively male.

Having now decided that young females are more `at-risk' of failing in their transition to adulthood than young males (with respect to unemployment), the question then is: what kind of intervention is appropriate in order to increase the employability of these young females? This question, in combination with an number of other concerns about girls, formed the basis for the Commonwealth Schools Commission's (1987) *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools.* One of the recurrent problem areas mentioned in this has been the kinds of curriculum choices made by girls within the school, which later hinders their future selection of occupation (sexism in the workplace aside).

Schwartz (1987) makes some relevant observations in this regard. She contends that girls considerably restrict their post-school educational and employment options by underparticipating in maths, science and technology. Whilst not criticising the career

aspirations of girls directly, Schwartz points to a need for greater female participation in subjects which will lead to a broader range of job opportunities - such as those associated with traditional apprenticeship schemes.

With regards to this issue, Powles (1992) notes that more young males than females aspire to go to TAFE - an educational route widely associated with the vocational/trades etc. Alternatively, more young females than males aspire to go to university - a more prestigious location, and the site of `caring' subjects such as nursing and teaching, but a site currently paying less employment dividends. Importantly, Powles records that this trend is even more evident when examining the aspirations of parents. To an even greater extent than their daughters, parents do not want their female children taking a career path involving the kinds of subjects dealt with at TAFE - even though the statistics suggest that this leads to jobs.

These sorts of perceptions are referred to directly by the then Minister for Education, John Dawkins (1992). Using a set of arguments which infuse the entire Finn report, he proclaims the need for a re-evaluation of the traditional divides between `general' and `vocational' education, between the academic and the technical/industrial. It is these last two areas which are traditionally dealt with at TAFE, and which least appeal to young females. Dawkins argues that *this* is where some changes must occur - not only in the broader community attitudes to TAFE, but also in the career aspiration of girls. After all, it is these aspirations which place them `at-risk'.

And yet, the responsibility for the career aspirations of young girls is not seen to rest solely, or even predominantly, with themselves. Dawkins (1992:8), like many others, points to the role of the parents in shaping the choices of their children.

> ANOP (Australian National Opinion Polls) also confirmed the findings of other researchers that parents are the most important influence in young people's career and employment-related decisions. The challenge for the community, then, is to develop an understanding and appreciation of the full range of education and training options that are available. This is a challenge for young people themselves, and particularly so for parents.

The Students at Risk Program (1989) makes exactly the same point when it claims that parents have `a key influence in changing aspirations and intentions'. Hence, all school programs dealing with the `at-risk' student must necessarily incorporate the parent. This is particularly the case with young females, since it is their own aspirations which place them `at-risk'. Schwartz (1987) also emphasises the role of the parents in

changing the intentions of their daughters, based upon sound `facts' rather than `traditional beliefs' about girls' education and employment. She cites the Beazley Report (1984) on education in Western Australia, which stated that curriculum and career choices were generally made as a result of parental pressure related to the roles of females in the community. Furthermore, `much of the reported advice from parents was ill-informed and lacking any real sense of contemporary schooling or the job market ...' (Beazley Report, 1984:94; cited in Schwartz, 1987:134). Parker and Offer (1987:153) also argue that the problem for young females appears to lie in their aspirations - and that these can be traced directly to their parents. As such, `entrenched stereotypes about jobs' amongst parents, need to be changed if girls are not to continue to be `at-risk' in their transition to employed adulthood.

As mentioned earlier, the `at-risk' youth is almost always authored in terms of the `risk family'. The normal rhetoric surrounding this family is one of poverty, abuse and dysfunction. However, as mentioned earlier, since `anything *can* be a risk', the `risk family' can take many different forms. In this case, the misplaced career aspirations of parents become an important `risk' factor, when positioned within the context of the kind of governmental transformations outlined by the Finn Report. This should not be a surprise. As McCallum (1993) observes in `Problem Children and Familial Relations', the domestic space is one of the most important and practical settings for instilling the capacities and attitudes required of a modern population. In this case, the desired attitudes are inculcated through the rationale of `risk'.

Conclusion

The central aims of this paper have been quite limited. Firstly: to point out that documents such as the Finn Report are part of the very process by which `youth' is formed and re-reformed as a category. In attempting to re-define the period of transition from education to employment, the Finn Report (along with Mayer and Carmichael) are part of the process, and form one of the sites, within which the category of `youth' is given its shape - both administratively and culturally. `Youth' is not a stage of life, but is instead an artefact of various forms of government. The Finn Report is an element of one such form of government.

Secondly, within the Finn Report - itself an extensive and effective mechanism of government - the notion of `risk' operates as an important component of a grid of governmental intelligibility. It legitimates an extensive range of governmental scrutiny of the population (especially `youth'), and not only that, it operates as a productive element of a larger system which records its observation, intervenes strategically and steers conduct in social and economically appropriate directions. The calculability, specificity and versatility of `risk' make it a far more efficient tactic for describing `youth' than any of its predecessors.

Finally, `risk' is used as a governmental rationale for managing the sex of young people. Young females are constituted by different `risk' factors to their male counterparts. As a consequence of these differences, the strategies of intervention employed within the various site of government also differ. Within the Finn Report, social trajectories of young females are regulated by adjusting the career aspirations of the parents. Thus, in effect, the character of the `at-risk' youth is used as the pretext for modifying and expanding the boundaries and responsibilities of the pedagogic family.

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